

Herding Cats

Because welfare made my mom work, she got a job at the post office. She coded mail. She worked the nightshift, the dayshift. Sometimes, she worked in delivery, heaving boxes from trucks. Sometimes she called me selfish. Other times, she called me impossible, like herding cats. We only had two cats. Two is not a herd. I wanted to go to my aunt's every day to clean bathrooms, empty trash, iron my gay uncle's suits he never wore. In their cupboards they kept great tubs of cheeseballs and great multi-pound bags of party mix and chocolate chips. I did laundry, even my mom's stringy underwear. I held their favorite toy, the swisher, a wand of feathers, curls of ribbon, and a small metal bell. I watched cable and ate my aunt's food. I played Felix the Cat video games in the room my aunt said was haunted. I read her books and folded towels. I watched *Cat People* and *The Cat from Outer Space*, balling socks. My mom was across town, sleeping days to cover nights, petting our cats, or walking the neighborhood because she said, *Men like skinny chicks*. I wasn't skinny or a chick. I was an egg who wanted hours alone to think. I wanted to roam an old farmhouse full of Scottish Folds, disappearing into worlds of space cats, ghost cats, and Cat Fancy. I was selfish with a wish. I was wishing myself elsewhere, feral, gone and the way to herd it there, was to vacuum the stairs, sweep the dust pussies, scoop the litter, the great round-faced ones ushering me along, holding the swisher against their tongue.

Sweetening the Kitties

Wear the newsprint cat dress I made you and the saddle oxfords, my aunt said on cat show days. I minded, carried kibble to the car, fetched cat miscellany, and lint brushed it all. I thought, this was how the world worked, minding my own thoughts. *Great minds think like cats*, my uncle said. I sat a folding chair. I read a choose your own adventure with a space cat. I smiled at people who stopped at our table of caged cats, awards fluttering blue ribbons. I smiled because, everywhere there were cats. People groomed cats or left them unattended. Cats everywhere played toy mice. *You can look around*, my aunt said, *Tell them you're my niece*. I looked around. I told anyone who asked, my aunt was a breeder and I got to help. I collected free copies of Cat Fancy, free cans of Fancy Feast, free cat posters for the guest bedroom where I slept at my aunt's. The intercom babbled with cat results and ribbons, *Best in Show!* I listened for the names of the calico, the cream, the bicolor stud. In her lacy collar and hennaed hair, my aunt burbled with potential cat buyers. I shook the sack of treats. My uncle played swisher, asking if anyone wanted to touch.